



*So you want
to do a
Housing Survey?*

Compiled by staff from the Sherman Park Community Association
and the City of Milwaukee Department of Building Inspection





A Housing Survey?

Why would neighbors want to do a volunteer “housing survey” in their neighborhood?

Who’d want to:

- ▷ Get a working committee to decide the territory to be surveyed?
- ▷ Decide what to look for; Broken chimneys, hanging gutters, peeling paint, rotting porch steps, old cars sinking into the backyard, or whatever?
- ▷ Design the “survey check list”?
- ▷ Figure out how many volunteers you have to recruit and how to recruit them?
- ▷ Select a day and a meeting place and a trainer?
- ▷ To bring coffee, sweet rolls?
- ▷ Draw up the route each volunteer or team of volunteers will cover?
- ▷ Create a folder for each with the route on it and survey forms in it?
- ▷ Accept the completed survey forms later in the day and thank the volunteers?
- ▷ Prepare the letter which will be sent to the owner of each property at which important code violations were noted and to have agreed on what’s important?
- ▷ Prepare a list of the Neighborhood Improvement Programs, low interest loan programs, tool loan centers and other resources appropriate to your neighborhood which you then include in the letter asking the home owner to bring his house up to code?
- ▷ Secure the print out of the name and address of the owner of each property in the territory (so you know where to send each letter)?
- ▷ Decide how much time you are going to give these owners to fix up their place?
- ▷ Prepare new folders for resurveys when the time is up?
- ▷ Line up the volunteers to do the resurveys?
- ▷ Analyze the resurvey forms?
- ▷ Choose which properties, if any, to refer to Building Inspection?

Why would anyone want to do all this? Could it be because you’re concerned about about the signs of deterioration in your neighborhood? Could it be you realize that if you and your neighbors don’t, no one else will? What ever the reasons, here is a guide to help you make it work!



GETTING STARTED

It is possible for a person, working alone, to walk up the street and down the alley on several city blocks looking critically at houses, garages, yards and walks, fences and bushes. He or she could write the addresses at the top of the survey sheet and note all the code violations for each property with violations. He or she could then send a letter to each property owner listing the violations and asking that they be corrected. He or she could write that, if the necessary repairs were not made in two months (or three or six months), the Building Inspection Department would be asked to inspect. While all of this might cause many repairs to be made, it would be a lot of work for one person. Furthermore, many owners might not feel that one person carries enough “weight” to move them to action, and relatively few of us feel comfortable acting alone.

Most of us, therefore, look for others in our neighborhood who share our concern. This may take shape as the 1100 N. 24th Place Block Club or the Board of Directors of the Near West Side Improvement Alliance or as the Housing Committee of Hunter’s Hill Neighborhood Association. It may be a group of five or twenty-five which decides, “We had better survey the broken garage doors before another neighbor is dragged into a garage here.” However many and whatever the precipitating issue, this is potentially the start of a housing survey.

THE CONCERNED GROUP



Your group may feel that you need to concentrate on a block or two - or four - or the southeast corner of your neighborhood, or you may want to survey the whole thing. Any of these decisions is fine, but don’t bit off more than you can chew. Do you have enough willing volunteers to survey the area you have selected? You may want every structure and lot in your chosen target area to be brought up to code in every way, and that’s fine if you so choose.

But you may be especially focused on litter and broken concrete and eroded lawns, or the overgrown hedges from which muggers or rapists have surprised their victims. Whatever you elect to look for is O.K. Just be sure to reach agreement and assess the ability of your volunteer pool to get the task done.

Having picked the “things to be looked for,” you will need to design your survey form. A general housing survey form is appended. It includes points which are not necessarily violations, but which the surveying group may want to know, i.e. (For-sale signs and boarded up houses are not code violations.) Building inspectors recommend to examine structures from the top down because maintenance failures tend to occur from the top down. Please keep that in mind as you design your survey form. That approach is reflected in the appended survey form.

THE WORKING GROUP



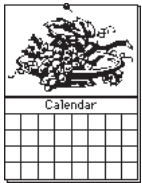
Know your volunteers. If your target is your block, your block club members can handle it. If the housing committee has ten members and your target is four blocks, your committee can do the job. But if Harmony Heights Improvement Association is 15 blocks by 20 blocks, and if you are going to survey for the whole range of code violations, and if you intend to survey all 300 blocks, and if you don’t wish to drive away your housing committee members by assigning each of them 30 blocks to survey. THEN, you will want to look for some volunteers by soliciting neighbors, writing a story for the group’s newsletter, getting announcements in church bulletins, preparing public service announcements for local radio and TV stations and getting neighborhood newspapers to write about the survey well in advance of the chosen date.

If you hope to survey a large area, plot and plan how many volunteers you will need. This will require answering several questions: Are our folks walking or doing a driving windshield survey? How many blocks should one volunteer survey? Are we sending folks out alone or in pairs? Walking gives volunteers fuller range of view, tends to afford more detailed survey, but it exposes volunteers to rain, wind and neighbors who don’t want them there.



Using autos moves volunteers along more quickly and tends to keep them from straying into private yards. Signs can be printed up and taped in auto windows or on auto sides announcing the survey - this minimizes neighbors calling the police to report folks “casing our homes and making notes.” In calculating the number of blocks you might assign, consider that you need time to train your volunteers in surveying as well as covering their routes. Consider how severe the housing conditions in the area the volunteer will be surveying. Consider putting two in a car - one to drive, one to check the survey form - if you decide to use autos. If you elect to survey on foot, still consider pairing volunteers to support each other and to check each other’s observations and judgments about what is and what isn’t a valid concern.

When you have decided how many you must attract, you should realize that you are most unlikely to draw just that number. Prioritize your routes. Hand them out in your order of importance. In the happy event that you bring in more volunteers than you need to cover the chosen area, have a few route folders made up for adjoining blocks which might be spruced up in response to the survey. Try very hard not to turn away volunteers, just as you try not to burn them out by asking too much.



YOUR TIMETABLE

Of course, you would like all unsightly violations never to have occurred, so you certainly want them taken care of by next Friday - Saturday at latest. Unfortunately, we are not offering a magic wand here. Depending on the number of survey forms generated and volunteer and/or staff time available to process the information and get it into the form of letters to each owner, it will take from a week to a month or longer to get your concerns into the hands of the people we are asking to act. How long it will take them to get the paint, glass, putty, nails, brushes, hammers and ladders together and just do it, is unknown. Rest assured that well before the first porch has been repainted, several of the recipients of the letters will have contacted you with angry responses to your “meddling” or very sad stories about their circumstances. You will, in fact, talk with neighbors who formerly kept tidy homes and yards but no longer are physically or fiscally able to do so - and feel awful about that.

To have exterior work done in Milwaukee in the November-March time period is most difficult. Therefore, your letter should ask the owner to make the repairs when they can more easily be done. Consequently, many housing surveys are done in the spring to permit the letters to be sent while there is still plenty of warm weather ahead. Another possibility is to make the survey in the fall and send letters asking that the work be done the following spring and summer. Include with the letter information about the Neighborhood Improvement Program for your area, about NIDC, about WHEDA loans, about the city’s tool loan centers, etc. If this timetable is followed, owners who cannot just write a check for everything needed will be able to arrange financing in a more relaxed manner. Of course, if everyone in your neighborhood is financially well off and no house needs more than \$100 worth of work, do the survey when you wish, just keep the Milwaukee outdoor work season in mind.



THE DAY OF THE SURVEY

Now you are ready to pick the day and hour. Early on a Saturday is suggested here, because the volunteers can be trained, given their folders with the territory clearly described on it (e.g. both sides of 87th Blvd from Tulip to Sycamore) and a bunch of blank survey forms in it. And they can do their surveys and be back with their forms completed by noon or thereabouts.

You will need a place to meet. This could be a church, community center, the meeting room in your group’s offices, whatever is large enough to accommodate the crowd. Get someone to brew the requisite number of gallons of coffee, and also bring cups, sugar, cream, spoons, stir sticks and piles of paper napkins. Get someone else to check with the neighborhood bakery in advance and bring the requisite number of sweet rolls. Milwaukeeans seem to run well on this fuel.

Line up your training tools. Building Inspection has created a comprehensive video on housing problems and will provide a staff person to make a presentation. All you need is a VCR and a TV. You may also want the regular inspector for your neighborhood to be present in person or you may want the supervisor of your area inspector. Many things are possible if only your request is received early enough. Call Skip Seager (278-3445) and discuss your felt needs with him. You may also want to invite someone else to say a few words as a draw.

Your council member will probably appear for you if you make the invitation early enough. The Mayor



has agreed to appear in the past. This can help to get the volunteers out. Remember the offset, however, every extra minute of talking is another minute of volunteer time used. The rule is that the sooner they get out, the sooner they get back; and the sooner they get back, the more Saturday, or Sunday, they have left, the happier the volunteers.

Generally, volunteers are asked to return the completed survey forms to the hall from which they set out earlier that day. You may, on the other hand, close shop when volunteers set out with the understanding that survey forms may be returned to the office any time the following week. Some of your volunteers, because of conflicting commitments, will not be doing their beat on the appointed day. They will bring back their survey forms some days later in any event



GETTING THE LETTER OUT

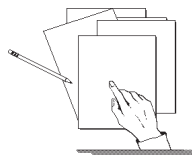
The Tax Commissioner of the City of Milwaukee tries very hard to keep a current list of the owners of each parcel of ground in the entire city - that's the only way to get the tax bills sent. That list is in the computer system of the city. The Department of Building Inspection can print out from the computer all the properties in your chosen target area with the names and mailing address of the absentee owners as well as the owner -occupants. It also has the ability to provide you with a diskette containing the information, if you have an IBM-compatible computer and have access to D-Base. It is a good idea to request that information well in advance of doing your survey. The ownership information is fairly current and accurate, but you should plan on a few calls saying "I sold that property" responses to your letters. Call the inspector who will be working with your group to talk over your plans.

If you have generated relatively few survey forms, you may elect to prepare individual letters to each owner describing the property and the violations and asking that they be corrected. If there are too many for that approach, a form letter with blank spaces for name and address of owner, address of property, and listing of the violations may be created. (sample letter attached.)

Volunteer or staff will then type in the particulars. However, if you will be sending out several hundred, if you have the word processing hardware and software, and if you have the volunteers and/or staff to run it all, you can put the owners list in, the addresses and the violations in, the letter form in, and get the finished letter printed out, ready to fold and stuff. You can get your address labels printed out too.

The wording of the letter is, of course, crucial. You want the owner to be moved to make the needed repairs, so the message must be clear and emphatic. But you certainly do not want to unnecessarily scold, embarrass or insult the owner. Unfortunately, there is no perfect letter - what is just enough to move one reader will not get through to another - and will insult a third reader. You may well choose to design separate letters for owner-occupants and for investors. Good luck in picking just the right words. (a couple of sample letters are appended.) You may also wish to send letters, or even certificates, to owners whose homes and yards are particularly well kept. This supports and encourages continued good efforts. (Again, see certificate sample appended.)

Another unhappy realization is now about to be thrust upon you. Some of your letters to owners will be returned to you with notations from the postal service that the addressee is deceased, unknown, left no forwarding address, etc. You will want to try to locate these persons or determine new owners by using new telephone listings or by asking city hall if they now have updated information. Even if you do not learn the name and/or whereabouts of the owner, proceed with your resurvey. If the property is in bad shape and there is no evidence of repairs underway, refer the address to Building Inspection at the end. BI will struggle to find the owner.



THE RESURVEY

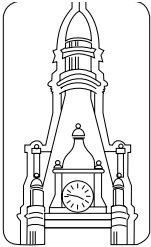
By the time the specified "work interval" (the 60 or 90 days you gave owners to fix it) is over, you should have prepared lists of addresses to be revisited; group those addresses into new route folders (these routes can cover more real estate because volunteers are looking only at the listed properties); and, based on the number of routes, recruit needed volunteers for the resurvey. If you have selected the resurvey date prior to the initial survey, you can do some recruiting then. You need to decide if you are going to give the resurveyors copies of the original survey forms or blank forms. The originals may bias the resurveyors but will surely help them to know what they are looking for. Think about it.



You are nearing the end of the process. The resurvey form must be analyzed carefully.

- a) Have the problems been corrected?
- b) Is there good evidence that they will soon be corrected?
- c) BI has determined that each neighborhood may refer up to 20 properties for follow up, so pick and choose carefully if you find that you have identified several dozens of properties in your resurvey which need work.

Best luck in your efforts. If, at any point along the way, you need clarification or elucidation (or something just doesn't make sense to you), feel free to call Sherman Park or Skip Seager, B.I., 286-3445.



WORKING WITH BUILDING INSPECTION

There are several key items which you should remember in working with BI. First, the idea of working with community groups was, in part, the department's idea and it is very receptive to any ideas to improve the process. Second, while the actions that the department may be able to take are somewhat restricted by legal constraints, it has experimented with a wide variety of enforcement techniques which a community group may be able to use. Third, building code enforcement takes time, especially when there is an uncooperative owner. While the department can order the owner to make repairs, and prosecute the owner if the repairs are not made, it typically cannot make the repairs happen. Fourth, there is a limit to the staff that can be assigned to any one project. Consequently, you can expect that your group will be asked to establish priorities for BI involvement with only 10-20 of your priority properties being handled at any one time. As problem properties are taken care of, new properties can be added to the list.

In most cases, a specific inspector will be the primary contact with a group. That inspector, in addition to making the inspections on most of the properties which have been referred, will coordinate providing your group with information on any orders which were issued by other inspectors, and the status of all orders as they proceed through the enforcement process. It is anticipated that there will be a contact with the groups on a regular basis depending on the situation.



THE ENFORCEMENT PROCESS

As mentioned earlier, the building code enforcement process is not necessarily a speedy one. This will be especially true since the properties which you will be referring are probably those where the owner has already demonstrated an unwillingness to cooperate. Once the referral is received by the department a check is made for existing orders. Where they exist, there will be a cursory inspection of the property to determine whether the orders reflect the current condition of the property. If they do, the enforcement process will proceed with those orders. If they do not, supplementary orders will be issued. If there are no orders, the building will be surveyed and orders issued. In most cases, the orders will primarily relate to exterior conditions since the department may not have access to the inside of the property, and correction of exterior conditions have the greatest visual impact on the condition of a neighborhood. If the department is aware of serious interior problems, or suspects that they exist, an attempt will be made to do an interior inspection also.

Once an order is issued the time given for compliance will depend on several factors. The time given for life-threatening conditions may be 1-3 days. The time given for extensive interior or exterior repairs will probably be 90 days. Orders for exterior conditions which are issued in the Fall will not be due until the following summer to allow the owner a reasonable opportunity to make repairs. In cases of routine painting, the owner may be given up to one year to correct the conditions. When the order comes due, the inspector may grant a further extension if there is evidence that the owner is making significant progress. Owners who fail to comply are ordered into a precourt conference where an attempt is made to obtain a written compliance agreement. This agreement can be an important factor in obtaining a conviction if it is necessary to prosecute the owner. If there is still no compliance the case is prosecuted in Municipal Court, a new order is re-issued, and the process begins again. How long does this take? It varies. Some owners comply almost immediately after receiving an order which threatens prosecution and a fine. Other owners may delay complying until they have been fined several times, a process which may take several years. That may seem like a long time—which it is—but if the clock is not started the process may never end.



Date

Owner's Name and Address

Dear Property Owner:

The property you own at _____ was found to be in very bad shape. Volunteers surveyed their blocks and found your property to be one of the worse. Some of the needed repairs are:

We would like to invite you to a meeting of the neighborhood housing committee on _____ at _____.

We have had success working cooperatively with property owners who want to make needed repairs. Hopefully we can reach a cooperative and creative solution. We are committed to resolving the conditions of properties in our neighborhood.

Please call _____ at _____ if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Date

Property Owner's Address:

Dear Property Owner:

The property you own at _____ needs repairs.

Some of the needed repairs are:

We hope you can have these repairs fixed before we recheck your property later this year.

If you have any questions about resources available to repair your property call at _____.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Date

Dear Property Owner:

In the course of our annual housing survey, our volunteers examined the property at .

They observed the following problems:

The Housing Committee, on behalf of the many neighbors, businesses, and institutions affiliated with the Sherman Park Community Association, asks that you correct these problems in the near future.

We will be happy to assist you in this process by providing information on home improvement programs and/or stores which provide a discount on materials to the unemployed.

If you have already corrected these problems, thank you.

If you are not the owner of this property or if the volunteers have mistaken assigned code violations to your property, please call as soon as possible to correct any errors.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Date

Dear Absentee Owner:

In the course of our annual housing survey, our volunteers examined the property at .

They observed the following problems:

The Housing Committee, on behalf of the many neighbors, businesses and institutions affiliated with the , ask that you correct these problems in the near future.

If you have already corrected these problems, thank you. If you are not the owner of this property, or if our volunteers have mistakenly assigned code violations to your property, please call
as soon as possible to correct any errors.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Date

Dear Neighbor:

Each spring members of _____ have gone up and down the streets surveying the homes in _____.

It is a pleasure to find a home that has been beautifully maintained. We recognize that a great deal of hard work is involved in maintaining a home while meeting the other demands of daily life. You, as a concerned resident of _____ have done an exemplary job of meeting this challenge.

Your efforts have not gone with notice or appreciation.

Thank you for playing such a vital role in portraying a positive image of our community.

With much appreciation,



Date

Because of the nature of Milwaukee weather, it seems as if we are always working to keep our homes painted and in a good state of repair. You may have noticed that your house shows some signs that work is needed. Now is the time you should be planning for repainting and for making any necessary repairs.

A fresh coat of paint and minor repairs will improve the appearance and value of your property, as well as prevent costly repairs in the future.

Planning ahead will make the job much easier. Don't forget that there are ladders, scaffolds and other tools to borrow free of charge to City of Milwaukee residents from the Milwaukee Tool Loan Centers. A brochure about these centers is enclosed.

This letter is a reminder to start planning ahead. In the fall we will again be reviewing the houses in your neighborhood to determine whether or not any further departmental action is needed. Should you have any questions call us at

Sincerely,



AGENCY NAME _____
VOLUNTEER HOUSING SURVEY

DATE _____

Property Address _____

Place a check mark next to the item that is not in a good state of repair or maintenance. Use the back of this sheet for more detailed explanations or to list problems that are not of the checklist.

1. HOUSE

____Chimney

____Roof

____Gutters and downspouts

____Upper porch railings
____Front ____Back

____Upper porch supports
____Front ____Back

____Defective or missing trim

____Trim needs painting

____Defective or missing siding

____Siding needs painting

____Broken or missing windows

____Foundation

____Lower porch railings
____Front ____Back

____Lower porch stairs
____Front ____Back

____Lower porch roof/ceiling
____Front ____Back

____Lower porch floor
____Front ____Back

2. GARAGE

____Roof

____Missing or defective trim

____Trim needs paint

____Missing or defective siding

____Siding needs paint

____Missing or defective doors

____Broken windows

3. YARD

____Defective fence

____Fence needs paint

____Soil erosion/bald spots

____Defective service walk

____Overgrown grass or weeds
(Sanitation 278-3341)

____Garbage nuisance or junk in yard
(Health Department 278-3535)

4. OTHER

____Best house on block

____Boarded up

____For sale and needs repair

____Graffiti _____a lot _____a little

____Additional items on back side

